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Reagan asks Congress for more aid to contras

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan formally asked Congress yesterday to approve \$100 million for military and other aid in the next 18 months to rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

In a message to Congress, Reagan said the roughly \$27 million in non-lethal aid voted last year was insufficient.

"If we fail to help friends in need now, then the price we will pay later will be much higher," Reagan said.

About 30 members of the House have asked Reagan not to seek a renewal of direct military assistance for the rebels fighting the leftist government, and lawmakers predicted that the administration's new quest for such aid would be the subject of a prolonged debate.

Reagan emphasized that "I do not intend to introduce the armed forces of the United States into combat against the government of Nicaragua, and I affirm that I will not regard approval of my request for assistance as authorizing any such action."

Reagan did not seek an emergency appropriation, requesting instead that the lawmakers approve a transfer of funds already appropriated for the Defense Department. He said he would deal later with the resulting "impairment in defense readiness."

The \$100 million would represent

about \$70 million in military assistance to be administered by the Defense Department, CIA or whatever other agency the President chose. The remaining \$30 million would be a continuation of funds for logistical and other nonlethal supplies to be disbursed by a special office created last year.

Congress approved \$27 million in such nonlethal aid last year, insisting that the money not be used for direct or indirect military support or administered through the Pentagon or the CIA.

The Sandinista government in Nicaragua seized power in 1979 after toppling the right-wing government of dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

The new government initially was supported by the United States, but aid was discontinued by then-President Jimmy Carter after the Sandinistas moved increasingly to the left.

The Reagan administration maintains that assistance to the rebels, known as contras, is needed to halt a military buildup in Nicaragua aimed at establishing a communist beachhead in the Western Hemisphere.

The Sandinistas say their military buildup is needed because the United States is trying to overthrow their government.

Reagan said that 25 percent of the money would be provided as soon as approved by Congress, with an additional 15 percent to be made available each 90 days thereafter.